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UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE  
Bureau of Agricultural Economics

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CHARACTERISTICS OF RECENT MIGRATION TO THE FAR WEST AND THE  
STRUCTURE OF ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY FOR MIGRANTS IN  
WESTERN AGRICULTURE

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Presentation by the Bureau of Agricultural Economics, Pacific Region  
before the House of Representatives Special Committee on  
Interstate Migration of Destitute Citizens

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Berkeley, California  
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Who is to be Considered as a Destitute Migrant?

As the name of your committee clearly designates, you are concerned with the movement of destitute people from one state to another. It is practically impossible, however, to segregate that group of people with whom you are primarily concerned from the entire group of people who change their states of residence during any specified period of time. Some of those who have moved during the past decade were simply being transferred by their employers; some were seeking more healthful climates; most were seeking a more favorable economic environment. Of those who were seeking a more favorable economic environment, a portion were leaving places where their normal occupations had for one reason or another almost entirely failed to produce a minimum livelihood. For these, the dire necessity of making a living dictated that a move must be made; there was no choice between two or more relatively attractive locations but only a choice between an environment which temporarily or permanently offered nothing and some other, usually far away, environment which it was hoped might offer something. Evidently it would be those who had departed from places offering no hope for a continued livelihood who might be considered as "destitute."

But some of the families coming from the most unfavorable economic environments have been able to leave with some financial reserve or with



a skilled trade, either of which has facilitated absorption and adjustment in their new home. On the other hand, there are some families who came to the Pacific States with neither financial reserve nor skill who have been fortunate in making satisfactory economic adjustment immediately.

The majority of those who were under greatest compulsion to move, however, have evidently not been able to achieve very satisfactory economic adjustment in their new places of residence. Although the committee is probably most interested in this more or less unadjusted group, it is most difficult to establish a research technique by which they can be clearly identified. Moreover, the migration of this group cannot be studied apart from all migration because the economic and social forces associated with migration of people who may be defined as "destitute" are not different from those related to all migration.

During the past two years the Bureau of Agricultural Economics has been engaged in a broad study of migration into California, Washington, Oregon, Idaho, and Arizona from other parts of the nation. In this study the movement of all classes of people from all occupations and all areas has been analyzed. In addition, the Bureau has investigated some of the types of relocation in agriculture in the Far West which relatively destitute migrants have found open to them. My testimony at this time will summarize the findings of the several aspects of the Bureau study, and I ask permission of the committee to present a more detailed document for insertion in the record at a later point.



## The Volume of Recent Migration to the Pacific States

The "migrant problem" of the Far Western States, which has excited such widespread discussion and controversy, has a long history. Westward migration of population in the decade 1930 to 1940 represents only the latest stage of a continuous movement to this area which has been going on since the days of the pioneers. Historically, the result of this migration has been a continuous and rapid increase in the population and in the economic development of this region. Most of the people who cleared the farms of the Pacific Northwest, who brought water to the land in California and Arizona, and who developed the commerce and industry of this region were "migrants" to the West. Between 1860 and 1930 the population of California experienced a growth of 1,500 percent. This was a rate of growth nearly four times as rapid as the growth of the national population during the same period. Only a small part of this rapid increase in population, however, has been due to natural growth. While exact measures of past migration do not exist, it is estimated from census data that approximately nine-tenths of the increase in the population of California within these eight decades, 1860 to 1930, was due to migration.

The largest migration to California, both in numbers and relative to the population already residing in the State, took place during the twenties when more than two million persons entered the State. The number of persons moving to California in the twenties constituted a larger addition than has been made to the population of any State by internal migration within any ten-year period in American history (National Resources



Committee, The Problems of a Changing Population, 1938, page 91). It is estimated from the study of the Bureau of Agricultural Economics that no more than 1,200,000 persons have been added to the population of California by migration during the thirties. This is 800,000 less than the number migrating to California between 1920 and 1930. Whereas the migration of some 2,000,000 persons added 60 percent to the population of California during the twenties, the 1,200,000 have added but 22 percent to the resident population as of 1930.

Between 1870 and 1910 the population of the Pacific Northwest (Oregon, Washington, Idaho) doubled, on the average, each ten years. The rate of growth in the Northwest was much slower between 1910 and 1930, averaging but 18 percent per decade. During the thirties, some 430,000 people moved into these three states, thus augmenting the population of the Northwest by somewhat less than 16 percent.

Most regions of the country have at some time during the past century increased their population by natural migration. Far Western States, however, have constantly attracted and held population from other states. "By the close of the Civil War the corn belt states were losing more persons than they were gaining by migration, by 1900 the area of loss had extended to Kansas, Nebraska, and Minnesota, by 1930 all of the states west of the Mississippi River, except three.....States (Oregon, Washington, and California) and Arizona and Nevada were losing more people than they were gaining through migration." (National Resources Committee, Problems of a Changing Population, 1938, page 91.)



While commerce and industry were expanding, when fertile lands remained unoccupied and additional agricultural population was needed, this inward migration was regarded as an adjunct to the general prosperity and doubtless intensified the expansion of economic activities. In our history, migration has been described as a process of equating population density with economic opportunity. Previously, there was a fair chance that every migrant would find employment and even a welcome in the economic and social life of his new community.

Movement of population to the Pacific region has continued since 1930, but it is distinguished from previous westward migration by occurring during a decade of industrial and agricultural depression and widespread unemployment. Newcomers to the Far West have in the 1930's been conspicuous proportions of the States' depression problem of relief, unemployment, health costs, housing and many others. The word "migrant" in the West has been used in this decade not as a term of honor describing a latter day pioneer; rather, it has become synonymous with "indigent," with "drought refugees," with habitual "migratory workers," with the "Joads" of the Grapes of Wrath.

#### Occupational and Geographic Sources of Recent Migrants to the Pacific Coast States

Migrants to the states of the Pacific region during the thirties were drawn from virtually all occupations, from servants and unskilled laborers to the most highly trained professional people. Agricultural people were an important element in the migrating population, but contrary to popular



impression they were by no means predominant. Less than one-fourth of all families migrating to California had been engaged in agriculture either as farmers or farm laborers prior to migration, while one-third of the families migrating to the Pacific Northwest and to Arizona had been engaged in farm work before migrating. For the entire group of families migrating to California, one fourth prior to migration had worked in manufacturing and mechanical industries, 22 percent had been engaged in agriculture, 17 percent had been occupied in trade. Additional industries were transportation, communication, mining and professional services of all kinds. Occupations represented among migrants to Arizona and to the Northwest were similar except for a greater proportion of people formerly engaged in agriculture.

One of the most significant findings of the Bureau study of migration to California was this: Except for the State of Oklahoma, migration drew more heavily on nonagricultural groups than on farmers and farm laborers. That is to say that, with the exception of Oklahoma, there was a marked tendency for both farmers and farm laborers to stay behind in those areas which were losing population to California.

The process of adjustment by the newcomers to employment opportunities in California required much shifting from one occupation to another. In this process of occupational adjustment there occurred a net shift out of agriculture. Whereas a total of 22 percent of the migrating group had been engaged in agriculture prior to California, only 14 percent have become engaged in that within California, and the great majority of those



working in California agriculture are engaged as hired laborers. Thus, two widespread beliefs--that the migration to California during the past decade has been almost entirely of an agricultural origin and that the agriculture of this region has absorbed the bulk of the migrants--are not supported by the findings of this survey. Likewise, in the Northwest, the proportion working in agriculture in 1939 was considerably less than the proportion reported to have been engaged in agriculture before coming into that region.

The majority of the agricultural people migrating to California in the thirties came from the South Plains States. Oklahoma, Texas, Arkansas, and Missouri were the states of residence in 1930 of more than half of the agricultural families enumerated. Most of the remainder of the agricultural families came from the states of Kansas, Nebraska, Colorado, Iowa, and South Dakota in the order named.

In contrast with the concentration of agricultural families migrating to California from the South Plains States, less than 20 percent of all nonagricultural families reported these states as their residence in 1930. Eleven percent of the nonagricultural families came from the New England and the Middle Atlantic States; 15 percent came from the North Central States; 20 percent from the West North Central States; and 24 percent from the Mountain and Pacific States.



## Occupational and Geographic Relocation in the Far West

Migration to the Pacific States during the thirties was not the haphazard drifting of a chronically migratory group who were trying by a process of trial and error to find an inhabitable place to settle. The Bureau studies clearly indicate that, for the majority of families, migration was a direct and purposeful move. The place of destination appears to have been selected in advance as one offering some promise of economic opportunity.

Approximately 60 percent of the families migrating to California had moved directly from other states to the counties in which they were residing in 1939. More than 80 percent had lived continuously in the same county since the year of their entry into California. In the Northwest, approximately the same conditions were found to prevail. A very large proportion of the migrating families ceased to be "migrants" within a very short time after entering the State.

Even among those migrant families who were engaged as agricultural laborers in California in 1939, more than one-half had lived continuously within a single county since their arrival in the State; three-fourths had lived continuously in the same county from within one year of their entry into the State. This purposeful migration and immediate relocation in California by agricultural migrants is at variance with the popular impression of "drought refugee" migrants to California of the thirties. The most widespread conception of the migrant to California during the past decade has been that he becomes an agricultural laborer who moves



from one seasonal harvest to another in various parts of the State as well as to neighboring states. The indications of our studies, however, are that of the proportion of all migrants who become agricultural laborers, only a small fraction work as continuously "migratory" workers. The great majority establish a fairly permanent domicile even though they may still be engaged in intermittent agricultural work within their community.

In general, the former occupational experience of the migrant families seems largely to have guided their selection of places to settle in California. More than half of the families settling in California's richest agricultural valley had been engaged in agriculture before migration. Few of the clerical group, or of the professional workers, settled there. The families whose former occupations were largely in professional, managerial, clerical, skilled labor, and other labor groups migrated to counties with large urban centers, where commerce and industry are concentrated. Only 11 percent of the migrant families relocated in the metropolitan counties had been engaged in agriculture before they moved. In contrast, nearly three-fourths of those who had been farmers and four-fifths of the former farm laborers settled in communities of less than 10,000 population.

More than three-fourths of all migrants to California settled in urban areas - cities of 2,500 population or larger. Nearly 40 percent settled in cities of over 100,000 population; 23 percent relocated in the city of Los Angeles alone.

In general, the most populous areas of the Pacific Northwest attracted



the most newcomers. Areas of greatest concentration were Portland and the Willamette Valley, the Puget Sound region, the Yakima Valley, Spokane, and the Snake River Valley. In the Northwest, as in California, the areas chosen for relocation followed the former occupational experience of the families.

Although the migrating families in general sought to relocate in the types of occupations they had pursued in their former homes, there was nevertheless considerable all-around adjustment. There was enough occupational shifting so that by 1939 the occupations of the migrant group corresponded approximately to the occupational structure of the Pacific States as of 1930.

Within western agriculture, there were two types of opportunities available to migratory families of meager financial resources. One of these was to locate on relatively cheap land which could be developed into farms. The other was to become hired farm laborers in the intensively cultivated areas of the West.

#### Experience, Situation, and Prospects of Migrants Resettled on Newly Irrigated Lands

In years not long past there were widespread opportunities for migrating families of meager financial resources to obtain new farms on land available for homesteading and on newly irrigated land. Recently, such settlement opportunities have become less numerous because of the previous development of the most accessible land. During the past decade the Vale and Owyhee irrigation projects in southeastern Oregon have



offered virtually the only opportunity in the West for the creation of new farms on newly irrigated land. Now under construction are such developments as the Black Canyon Project of Idaho, the Roza Division of the Yakima Project, the Columbia Basin Project in the State of Washington, and the East Mesa unit of the Imperial Valley Project in California.

Most of the settlers in the Vale and Owyhee projects were middle-aged people who had formerly been engaged in agriculture in nearby western states or in the Great Plains. Most of them had few resources at the time of their arrival. The average net value of assets at the time of settlement was approximately \$2,500. The Farm Security Administration extended credit to those who could qualify. Approximately 500 farmers in these two projects had loans from the Farm Security Administration in 1938.

Settlers were able to secure land at between \$5 and \$15 per acre, with one-third to one-half as the usual down-payment. Most of the settlers have been hard pressed for cash and have been compelled to live at low levels. Houses have been generally small and cheap, poorly constructed, and equipped with few conveniences. Overcrowding of dwelling space has been common. The typical expenditure for family living per year has been \$400 to \$500. In addition to cash expenditures, farm produced commodities added materially to family living. Notwithstanding the prevailing low levels of living, optimism and few complaints typified the new settlers included in this survey, for they looked forward to the time when they could enjoy incomes like those of the older settlers, who were spending an average of approximately \$800 per year for family living.



Prospects for future improvement in living conditions do not, however, disguise the prevalence of poverty and hardship during the development period of the new farms. The numerous families who had less than \$400 to spend on family living, and more particularly those with less than \$300, were in many cases inadequately supplied with goods and services necessary for health and decent living. Nearly two-thirds of the Farm Security Administration clients were living below the levels of expenditure established by that agency as the minimum for the maintenance of health.

During the first year or two financial progress was confined very largely to improvements to land, such as clearing, leveling, and seeding. With increased length of settlement, gains from land improvement became less and such gains as increased livestock, better buildings, and more food on hand were found. Settlers had less cash and liquid assets at the end of 1938 than they had at the time of settlement. They had invested all their money and borrowed more; but their farms had increased in value to such an extent that their net worth had increased. The average settler in 1938, even the longer-established one, was still pressed for cash to make immediate purchases and to repay debts. Family living expenses had to be held to a minimum, for the increased net worth was all in the farm. A large part of the increased net worth on those newly established farms came from a willingness to increase the farm productive plant at the expense of family living.



### Settlement of Migrants on Cut-Over Lands in the Pacific Northwest

Opportunities for relocation on cheap land have been even greater on the cut-over areas of the Northwest. The low cost of these lands and the opportunity to start farming with little capital appealed to many who were unable to find employment elsewhere and who lacked sufficient capital to purchase land in developed farming areas. The growth and possibilities of "stump ranching" have come to be part of the popular literature concerned with the recent migrant. Only a part, however, of the total recent settlement on cut-over lands has been by migrant families from other states. Many of the cut-over settlers came from Pacific Coast cities and were seeking an alternative to unemployment. Others were tenants and laborers from nearby areas.

Studies of recent settlement were made by the Bureau in two areas of northern Idaho and five in western Washington. Although the majority of the families found in these cut-over farms had moved there since 1930, only one-half had come from other states. Most of those from any considerable distance away came from the Great Plains. Families moving onto stump ranches were also of middle age - nearly one-half of the family heads were over 50. This is a point of some considerable significance in view of the arduous labor required to clear the land of stumps. Whereas the settlers of northern Idaho were principally former farm people forced to move by drought, crop failure, and related forces, those of western Washington were in large part people who had previously been engaged in nonagricultural industries in the nearby urban centers.



Prices of cut-over land generally range between \$10 and \$30 per acre. Most of the land is uncleared at the time of purchase. Since this type of settler must use rather primitive methods to remove the stumps, the rate of clearing is very slow. The soil being cleared is not uniformly good for the production of cultivated crops. Previous heavy stands of timber do not always indicate that the soil will be satisfactory for cultivation.

Thus far, family living of settlers on the stump ranches has been obtained largely from sources other than their farming. Employment in lumber industries, on nearby farms, and on public service projects was an important source of income as was also work relief. Total cash available for family living averaged approximately \$500. On the larger and older farms, more than one-half of the net family cash receipts came from the farm itself. The smallest and last developed farms, on the other hand, contributed less cash than was spent for their development, and these families received more than half of their income from public assistance. These farms did, however, contribute materially to family living in non-cash items such as food, fuel, and dwelling.

At their present rate of development the majority of these cut-over farms cannot be brought into self-sustaining production units within the lifetimes of their present operators. Many will probably never serve for more than part-time or retirement farms. There will probably be many instances of disappointment and abandonment where settlers seeking full-time farms have located on unproductive soil. The continuance of



the majority of them depends upon the existence of a high level of employment opportunity away from their farms.

#### Relocation of Migrants as Agricultural Laborers in Intensive Farming

The other type of opportunity for relocation within western agriculture which migrant people of small resources have found open to them is as agricultural laborers. These opportunities have been greatest in the Salt River Valley of Arizona; the Sacramento, San Joaquin, and Salinas valleys of California; and the Willamette, Yakima, and Snake River valleys of the Northwest. In terms of the number of people absorbed, the field of agricultural labor has been far more important than establishment as operators on older farms, or on new farms in reclaimed or cut-over areas. In California, the number of migrants who were employed as farm laborers was three times the number who became farmers; in Arizona, the ratio was four to one; while in the Northwest, approximately equal numbers became farmers and hired farm laborers.

In years past seasonal work in the fields and in the packing plants has been done quite largely by workers who were continuously migratory, following the same type of work from one area to another. The majority were single men, and where migratory families were involved, in California and Arizona, they were generally Mexican.

With the entry of migratory white family groups into the field of seasonal and casual labor in western agriculture, a different pattern has been developed. Some of the new white family groups have remained



continuously migratory; some of the old migratory workers still remain. But the great majority of the families who have migrated westward during the past decade and entered seasonal agricultural employment have established a fairly permanent domicile. With this permanent domicile as a base, the workers of the family have pursued seasonal employment within their immediate localities.

Now the permanent domiciles to which I refer have not been permanent homes in the usual sense. Relocating families employed at seasonal agricultural jobs have had to improvise the best shelters they could out of the very small means available to them. Many have purchased tiny cheap lots and constructed houses at a cost of \$200 to \$500 on them. Such arrangements are to be found in the numerous new shantytowns located in the Sacramento, San Joaquin, and Salinas valleys in California and in the Yakima Valley of Washington. In general, the housing units of these new communities can be said to be inadequate, and to be creating new rural slums. Nevertheless, they represent endeavors to establish permanency by people who are trying to escape the hardships and undesirability of a migratory and homeless existence.

Not all of the people living in these shantytowns are at present engaged as agricultural laborers. On the other hand, not all of the migrant people who are engaged as agricultural laborers live in the shantytowns. Some of them live in more acceptable housing units in longer established communities, some are living in housing provided by employers, and others live in housing facilities made available through the Farm Security



Administration. In addition, as indicated above, some small proportion are still moving about without any permanent domicile. These include families who have chosen to follow the crops rather than to endeavor to make a living in one place, and others who are still searching for an opportunity to settle down.

The incomes of those families engaged in seasonal agricultural labor, although very low, compare favorably with the incomes of families who have endeavored to build up farms on cut-over land. They are unfavorable as compared with the incomes of those families who have been established on newly irrigated farms for four or more years. The financial situation of the latter group at the time of arrival was much superior, however.

The majority of agricultural laborer families in the Pacific States are able to earn, counting the employment of all members, as much as \$450 to \$700 per year. This does not include the value of housing or other perquisites furnished by employers or the amount of home-produced income by those families who are settled down. Taking the group as a whole, however, income from all these sources does not contribute substantially to the above indicated amount of cash income.

Earnings of agricultural families are subject to rather extreme seasonal variation. The general low level of earnings plus the fact there is practically nothing coming in during the slack season lasting from December through March, force a great number of these families to seek temporary support from public assistance agencies. Although the majority



have to seek public assistance at some time during the year, they receive only a small part of their total annual income from public assistance sources.

Limitations of time have not enabled us here to present appraisals of the future possibilities for absorption of additional families in each of those fields of western agriculture or of the future of individual families within the respective fields. This will be covered more fully in the statement to be submitted later for insertion in the record.

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